

New Women in Colonial Korea

A sourcebook

**Compiled and translated with an
introduction by Hyaeweol Choi**

1 The woman question

Editor's introduction

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the “woman question” was actively incorporated into the discourse of “civilization and enlightenment” (*munmyōng kaehwa*), serving as a yardstick for evaluating the level of “civilization” or “barbarity.” In the social-Darwinian discourse of civilization and enlightenment, the “backwardness” of Korean women had to be remedied in order to move forward along the universal, linear path of historical progress. Women were expected to come out of the inner chambers, to become educated, to be well versed in domestic and world affairs, and to play a role in building an independent nation-state. The newly emerging print media in the form of newspapers and magazines played a significant role in revisiting old gender ideology and advocating new gender ethics.

This chapter is comprised of translations of some representative editorials and newspaper articles on the “woman question.” In an editorial from April 21, 1896, *Tongnip sinmun* (*The Independent*) calls the harsh treatment of women by men in Korea “barbaric,” offering a sharp critique of the Confucian patriarchal social arrangements that had effectively deprived women of their basic rights and human dignity (Source 1). It singles out oppressive customs, including concubinage, the ban on remarriage for women, and the “inside-outside rule” (*naeoebōp*), which were designed to control women’s sexuality and ensure men’s dominance over women’s lives. In doing so, the new gender discourse stresses the idea of “equal” treatment under the universal law and the appeal to “rationality” and “moral righteousness.” The particular editorial translated here even suggests that women are far superior to men in terms of their moral behavior and thus would be a good model for decadent, depraved men to emulate. Korea’s discourse on New Womanhood brings to the fore the inner moral and ethical strength of women, which parallels the Victorian gender ideology in which women were claimed to have superior morality and spirituality (Baker 1991; Deuchler 2003).

Educating women was the single most important agenda in the “woman question,” but it was effectively linked to other relevant issues, such as equal rights and women’s contribution to society. Although the initial advocacy of

women’s education was exclusively led by male intellectuals, “A Circular for the Establishment of a Girls’ School” (*Yōhakkyo sōlsi t’ongmun*), published in 1898, opened up a new beginning in that it is the first public statement demanding gender equality and equal education for women that was initiated by women (Source 2). In this piece announcing the plan to establish the Sunsōng Girls’ School, the organizers argue that men and women are equal, and yet the rules and customs that had been instituted by men have reduced women to beings of lower status. Urging Koreans to emulate the examples of the “advanced, civilized” societies that provide equal education for women and men, the message pleads with women to wake up and see the rapidly changing world, and argues that, in order to have an equal share and receive due respect, women should be educated.

Starting with *Kajōng chapchi* (*Home Journal*) and *Yōja chinam* (*Guide for Women*), founded in 1906 and 1908, respectively, the publication of women’s magazines joined other print media in educating women and the general public (Ewha yōja taehakkyo han’guk yōsōng yōn’guso 1981: 143–144). The way *Kajōng chapchi* was founded is noteworthy, as it was initiated by a Christian group at Sangdong Church whose Youth Association (*Sangdong ch’ōngnyōnhoe*) had opened up a new path to mass education since its establishment in 1904. Originally intended to distribute the gospel to Koreans, the Sangdong Youth Association expanded its activities, offering military training and frequently holding debates with renowned intellectuals to enhance nationalist consciousness in the younger generation. Later, some members of the Sangdong Youth Association decided to found a woman’s magazine in order to educate women, especially those who were housewives or had not had an opportunity to attend school. The overall tone in these magazines is largely in line with the spirit of the Patriotic Enlightenment movements (1905–1910) in the sense that women’s “new” roles are configured within the context of building a modern nation-state. A central theme was the “new” role of wife and mother. Introducing inspiring stories from both the East and the West, these magazines tried to instill new models of the “good wife” and the “wise mother or brave mother” (Ewha yōja taehakkyo han’guk yōsōng yōn’guso 1981: 160–162, 181–182).¹ To help Korean women emulate this model of the good wife and wise mother in an increasingly competitive world, these magazines instruct readers on a wide range of new knowledge and information about how to govern the family with wisdom, hygiene, and practical knowledge. The sections on hygiene especially introduce “scientific” advice, including how to carry babies, how to preserve fish, how to discern good water from bad water, how to remove moisture in the cupboard, how to use the shell of an egg, or how to ensure a sound body and prevent illness (Ewha yōja taehakkyo han’guk yōsōng yōn’guso 1981: 165–167).

In addition to women’s magazines, Protestant Christian periodicals published in Korea, such as *Sinhak wōlbo* (*Monthly Magazine on Christian Theology*, founded in 1900) and *Kūrisdo sinmun* (*The Christian News*, founded in 1897),

also contributed to the recasting of gender norms. These Christian magazines naturally centered on theological issues but also dealt with social and cultural issues, including women's lives in Korea. The essay by Mun Kyŏngho, an evangelist, takes up the custom of the "inside-outside rule" (*naeoebŏp*), which had imprisoned women in the inner quarters (Source 3). He introduces the Christian idea that God created man and woman equal as the basis for his argument that, "we Christian men will love and protect our wives, chosen for us by God, and we will give them freedom so that they can go anywhere that they wish." Although published in a non-Christian magazine, An Ch'ŏngang's essay also invokes the idea that God (*hananim*) made women and men equal as the basis for his sharp critique on "evil" customs, represented in practices such as the concubine system, son preference, the denial of education to women, and the general disrespect shown for women by men and society (Source 4). Scrutinizing men's habitual taking of numerous concubines, An puts forward the idea of monogamy as the new, just marital system in which the woman is not treated as an object for men's sexual gratification, and sons and daughters are treated equally.

Yi Kangja's article discusses women's freedom (*chayu*) as a critical condition for women to contribute to the state (*kukka*) (Source 5). Locating a new role for women in the matters of the mandate of the state, the author claims freedom for women as members (*inmin*) of the state in order for them to contribute to making it strong and prosperous. Yi's emphasis on women's rightful participation in economic matters is noteworthy because she sees it as a way to eliminate the old custom that confined women to the inner quarters and, more importantly, as a way to bring women into the public realm, where they can make an economic contribution to the family and state.

The last essay in this chapter was written by a thirteen-year-old girl student at an elementary school, *Yanggyu ūisuk* (Source 6). She attributes the unequal status between men and women to unequal education over many centuries. The disparities, she argues, are not just a matter of inequality between men and women but a matter of unbalanced power relations between Korea as a weak country and other, stronger nations. Celebrating the establishment of a girls' school and a women's monthly magazine as a sign of hope for the future, the author identifies the critical importance of women's education and enlightenment for a stronger and more advanced Korean nation (Yi 1908).

1 An editorial from *The Independent*

[*"Nonsŏl," Tongnip sinmun April 21, 1896*]

The most pitiful being in this world is the Korean woman. Today we address the Korean public on behalf of these unfortunate women. Woman's status is by no means lower than man's, but he debases her. When he is not civilized, he does not think with rationality or humanity; instead he uses his physical

power to suppress woman. Is this any different from barbarity? What distinguishes a human (*saram*) from a barbarian (*yaman*) is that the former behaves in accordance with respect, etiquette, and loyalty. If you observe Korean men and see the way they treat their wives, you notice they do not show any affection, loyalty, or courtesy toward them. A man treats his wife like some despicable creature, without the slightest trace of affection. He follows traditions in which he acts in forceful and authoritative ways that excessively oppress his wife. Given such behavior, how can we not feel pity for women and anger toward men? A truly great man (*changbu*) would offer relief from an existence of frailty and misery and would look down on a man who exercised such brutal excesses of power and arrogance. Women are weaker than men; therefore, it is natural and proper for a great man to show concern and care for women. Simply because woman is more delicate, she has been deprived of her rights to freedom, treated like a criminal in prison. It is simply deplorable and disgusting to think about the grave sin man has committed against woman.

In terms of behavior, woman is far superior to man. First of all, men engage in obscene behaviors far more frequently than women do, such as when they take concubines. Doesn't this show us that women are more high-minded and pure of character? These unreasonable men have crafted customs that allow them to shamelessly indulge their sexual appetites, even after marriage, yet these same men consider any similar behavior on the part of women to be ruinous. How could there be such unfair treatment? It would be understandable and legitimate for a man who conducts himself well and remains chaste to kick his wife out of the house and let her suffer the legal consequences if she were behaving sinfully; however, if he himself misbehaves, he should have no right to condemn his wife. It is only fair that men who engage in obscenity and concubinage should be punished just as any woman would be for similar indiscretions.

The vulgarity that clutters men's minds does not allow them to trust their wives, so they have forced women to stay inside the house and made the "inside-outside rule" (*naeoe hanŭn pŏp*). How outrageous it is that men have confined women to the house like criminals, forced them to labor like servants, and treated them no better than they would treat an animal. Men have created laws that allow a man to remarry after the death of his wife. Yet, if a woman remarries after the death of her husband, she is considered vulgar. What kind of system is this? It should be just as acceptable for a young woman who has become widowed to remarry as it is for a man.

Once women become better educated and obtain a fuller range of knowledge, they will recognize that women's rights are equal to men's and develop strategies to avoid the unreasonable controls that men have put on them. Therefore, we urge women to make great efforts in learning so that they become nobler than men and have great knowledge. In doing so, we hope women will gain their rights and educate ignorant, unjust men.

2 A circular for the establishment of a girls' school [excerpt]

[“Yōhakkyo sōlsi t’ongmun,” *Tongnip sinmun* September 9, 1898]

Successive reigns over the course of 500 years have been peaceful and stable. Since our king ascended to his reign, our country has been thriving, thanks to his magnanimous virtue. Now he is the Great Emperor and governs the politics of civilization and enlightenment, overseeing a wide range of political and administrative systems. Thus we 20 million people should faithfully embrace the will of the Emperor by abandoning indolent old customs and emulating new ways of enlightenment. In doing so, each individual can improve day after day. This is evident even to young children.

And yet a question remains: how can we women always hang on to old customs like deaf and blind idiots? Who knows? Is there any difference between men and women in their bodies and senses? If not, why is it that women allow themselves to sit idly by to be fed by what men have earned? How can women allow themselves to remain confined in the deep inner quarters, restrained by others for their entire lives?

If we look to countries that were civilized before ours, we see that men and women have equal rights. From a young age, women attend school, attain various levels of learning, and expand their perspectives. When they reach adulthood and get married, they coexist with their husbands for the rest of their lives, never suffering from suppression. Rather, they are highly respected. The reason why women in those countries are not oppressed but esteemed by their husbands is because they learn as much as men and have equal rights. Isn't this beautiful?

Alas, reflecting on the past, [Korean] men tried to oppress women in the name of the so-called classics that teach women not to talk about the outside world, to dedicate themselves only to making food and drink. Why should women allow themselves to be removed from life and kept ignorant of world affairs by men, when there is no difference in the bodies of men and women? It is time for us to eradicate old customs and strive for enlightenment and progress.

We need to do what has been done in other countries: establish a girls' school where we can send our daughters so that they acquire the knowledge and proper behavior that would bring them respect and equality. Now we plan to establish a girls' school for this purpose. We sincerely hope that many respected members of the nation will enthusiastically support our endeavor by signing their names as members.

Respectfully submitted,
Yi Sosa and Kim Sosa²

3 Mun Kyōngho: The Custom of the Inside–Outside Rule

[“*Naeoe hanūn p’ungsok*,” *Sinhak wōlbo* 3, no. 7 (1903): 187–190]

Regardless of the level of civilization or the size of their territories, all nations have their own customs, some of which are good and others bad. In the next hundred years, many countries on earth will engage in reforming their customs, making good customs better, and eliminating bad ones, so that they can save people from ignorance. It would be impossible to list all the customs of all nations, but let us take as evidence of the movement toward civilization the examples of the countries that have abolished evil customs and joined the league of advanced countries. [Among the old harmful customs, one can cite the following:] Intending to make their babies beautiful, people in the United States press the head of a new baby with their rough hands so that its occiput will be round [instead of being flat]. Black people in Africa have piercings in their ears, noses, and lips, and they go around naked without feeling any shame. People in India burn widows and drown babies in the river. The Japanese put permanent tattoos of dragons, black lions, and other ferocious animals over their entire bodies. Russians grow beards and mustaches because they believed they cannot go to heaven without wearing them. In China, in order to confine women to the inner chambers, men have the feet of the women bound from childhood. As a result, women need to use canes in order to go anywhere. However, from last year, the Chinese decided to abandon this awful custom, and these other countries have been reforming their traditional practices.

But, in our own country, we have not even begun to change the custom of the “inside–outside rule” (*naeoebōp*). Treated like material objects, women in Korea have been confined to the inner chambers, prevented from going anywhere. Men have their women make clothes, prepare food, and do all kinds of odd jobs as if they were slaves. And if a wife does not prepare food or clothing in a timely manner, her husband harshly criticizes her. While men enjoy drinking and eating fine food, they do not even consider sharing these pleasures with their wives. While they go on picnics to scenic places, they prohibit their wives from moving even one step outside the house. While men would never consider criticizing a fellow man for destroying his family through profligacy, gambling, and drinking, they cannot forgive the slightest mistake made by their wives and beat them half to death or expel them from the house. They never let their wives know what they are doing. As a result of the treatment they receive from their husbands, many women commit suicide by drowning themselves or hanging themselves. Some run away or take opium or swallow poison. Even a slave that costs hundreds of *nyang* [old Korean currency] and would be willing to work to death could not endure a harsher life than this. Korean wives are the most miserable of the miserable. Alas, how sad it is!

When God created man and woman, he planned for them to live in perfect harmony and love each other as equals. So how could Korean women not have

any rights? There is no reason other than ignorance. It is reported that the population of our country is now twenty million, and women, fully half of the population, have been oppressed and treated like prisoners by their husbands. They have been confined to the inner chambers and have never had a chance to see the outside world if they so desired. This is a truly lamentable situation. Once, when I visited a prison on an evangelical mission, I saw a man who had been caught during a riot and put in jail a few years earlier. Many other prisoners had been granted leniency at major celebratory events for the nation, but, since this man was a widower and an easy mark, he was never released. Instead, he was kept on in the jail to do all kinds of odds and ends with a meager wage. He was never allowed to see the outside world and spent the remainder of his life with prisoners. It is clear that the life of this man was an endless misery, and yet could we say the lives of Korean women are any better than his?

Regardless of whether we are satisfied with them or not, we Christian men will love and protect our wives, chosen for us by God, and we will give them freedom so that they can go anywhere that they wish. In addition, the husband and wife must act together for the good of both. For example, if the husband practices Christianity, but he does not allow his wife to go to church because he is concerned about her walking openly in the street, then her soul will be plunged into hell because she did not go to church. If we Christians do not give up this evil custom of the "inside-outside rule," how can we save the world?

4 An Ch'öngang: It is not right to look down upon women

[*"Puin ŭl natke pom i pulgahan il," Kajöng chapchi 1, no. 7 (1907): 6-8*]

In the East, woman was traditionally considered to be lower than man. It was considered something of a universal law that man is superior and woman is inferior. However, why would God (*hananim*) create man and woman in such a hierarchy? In our country, people have thought women to be lesser beings and have treated them as such without realizing the consequences of this attitude. When a woman is treated as an inferior being in society, there are many problems in the family as well. I am going to talk about these problems. There is no way to count all the problems caused by men's dismissive, disrespectful treatment of women, but I will list below some of the most serious problems.

The first problem is the concubine system. When the universe began, and the sky, earth, and all things were created, humans were endowed with the most divine spirituality. Since then, it has become a universal law that a proper unit consists of one man and one woman. It is improper if a woman has two husbands or a man has two wives. Since women are regarded as lower beings

in our country, people would consider it a catastrophe if a woman were to have two or three husbands. A widow is not even allowed to remarry. In contrast, a man can begin to take concubines after marriage. It is rather common to see a man possess seven or eight concubines. In fact, it is hard to find a man who does not have a concubine, and people even ridicule men who have no concubines for being unmanly. The result of this concubine system is that many men ruin their families and properties and cause disharmony among family members. Children born of concubines are designated separately and discriminated against. What impact have all these evil practices had on our country?

The second problem is that women have not been given the opportunity to become educated. Men learned how to read and gained knowledge, but, as women were not considered human beings, they were denied education. As a result, women have been mired in archaic ideas. They do not know how to educate their children, how to manage their households, how to socialize, or how to cultivate their minds. We cannot possibly measure the negative effect of all this.

The third problem is a lack of humanity. Because a woman is thought to be a lowly creature, people are happy when a son is born. If a baby girl is born, they feel sorrow. They do not think of daughters as legitimate heirs and legally prevent daughters from continuing the family line. As a result, if a family's only child is a daughter, they will adopt the son of another family in order to extend the line. By adopting someone else's son, how can this family understand anything of true filial piety? We can see many examples in which this practice of adoption has ruined families.

The fourth problem is that men regard women simply as objects of pleasure. As women are thought to be low, men do not treat them with respect. Rather, they consider women as some kind of toy to play with. Not only do men show callous disregard for women by patronizing *kisaeng samp'ae* (lower-level entertainer)³ and *saekchuga* (whorehouse), they do not even show the smallest measure of respect or propriety toward the wives of other men. How corrupt our custom has become! We should feel ashamed to even think of ourselves as people with good manners.

What I have described above are the most evil of a variety of practices. There is no space here to list other minor evil customs. I sincerely hope that people will think about the principle of gender equality so that they stop treating women as lowly beings. I also hope that women themselves will give serious thought to the ways in which their oppression could be overcome.

Women are weak by nature and should be treated with generosity rather than oppression. However, our people tend to lack a sense of moral justice that challenges the strong and supports the weak. It is truly deplorable that men do not have any pity toward women, who are less powerful; instead, they oppress women, forbid them to cross the doorstep of their homes and put them down.

5 Yi Kangja: Women's freedom

[“*Yōja ūi chayū*,” *Yōja chinam 1* (1908): 28–29]

When a state (*kukka*) is formed, it has people (*inmin*), and they are given freedom. In the formation of the state, it is the law that men have men's freedom and women have women's. In Korea, it is unclear whether men actually have freedom or not, but, as for women, it is quite certain that they do not have any freedom. As women are not free, they have no choice but to depend on others. It is truly deplorable. The customs that have developed over the centuries of our history have kept women confined to inner chambers, where they are unrelentingly, hopelessly isolated, as though they are in thickly wooded mountains or the deepest ocean. Their only choice is to depend on their husbands for food and clothing. When they go out, they ride in a suffocating palanquin. They spend their lives knowing nothing about society and world affairs. They never learn how to expand their property or engage in economic matters. Korea has 20 million people; half of that population are women. How could a country become wealthy if half of the population are deprived of freedom and individuality, do not know how to make their family prosper, live in confinement, are even restrained from freely using their own hands and feet? It is a very sad situation.

It is my greatest hope that we women of Korea will quickly become enlightened and, through this enlightenment, learn to gain and maintain our freedom, work together with men to keep our rights as members of the state, manage our property, and be prosperous. In doing so, I hope that we serve our Majesty, bringing strength and good fortune to our country.

6 Yi Yongja: Hope for equality between men and women

[“*Namnyō tongdūng ūi hūimang*,” *Yōja chinam 1* (1908): 37–38]

Both men and women are human; however, why are they not regarded as equals? In fact, the question should go beyond this: why do men oppress women, while women are expected to blindly obey men? Men are not necessarily more virtuous than women, and women are no more evil than men. The difference is that men have been educated, whereas women have not. If we look throughout the history of the entire world, we find many male heroes who accomplished a great deal; however, we find very few female heroes. Surely men and women share the same traits of humanity at the core of their existence. But the discrepancy in knowledge between them is striking, and thus women have not been treated as equals. How pitiful it is.

Observing the current world and its trends, we can see a parallel relationship. We have our own country, just as others in the East and the West have their countries. In the same way that our nation is oppressed by other countries and has lost equal status vis-à-vis the world community, we women have been

unable to gain status equal to men. It is because women have not been as educated as men. Therefore, if we want to regain our national sovereignty, we need to promote not only men's education but also women's education. Once both men and women are educated, they can become equal and thus recover equal rights (*kwōlli*) as human beings. Only then can the power of our nation be regained. This is the reason why concerned educators have established a girls' school, encouraging them to study hard. We women are so grateful for this indispensable step toward equality that no words can express our sincere appreciation. We students must make earnest efforts in our studies so that we will be well equipped with knowledge and able to cultivate a respectable demeanor. Then we can be equal to men and serve as a foundation for our country.

Also, these concerned people not only support women's education but also publish a monthly magazine, called *Yōja chinam* (*Guide for Women*). When all women—old and young—read this magazine, they can learn and understand the ideals of the country, and then they can contribute to the progress of civilization. I am only a thirteen-year-old girl in an elementary school, but, upon hearing about the publication of this magazine, I could not help but write a few words of great joy to congratulate the publishers for launching the magazine. I would like to plead with our fellow countrywomen to read the magazine because it is like a compass guiding us where we women should go. Let's follow the compass and move forward. I sincerely hope that, with the right direction from this “guide for women,” we will see women gain rights equal to those granted to men in civilized countries and help bring about our national sovereignty. Long live our country!

Notes

- 1 For example, one story praises an unspecified “Western” woman for her unlimited support for her husband despite his mistakes. Another tells the tale of a French woman who rescued her husband from jail by switching clothes with him so he could slip past the guards, while she took his place in the cell, exemplifying the ideal of a sacrificing wife. Other stories were included about Korean women whose wifely devotion and sacrifice did not have any limit in the face of humiliation and suffering. A good number of examples of “wise or brave mothers” are also prominently featured, including the classic tale about King Solomon's verdict to cut an infant in half when confronted with the case of two women who claimed to be the mother of the baby, and how the true mother revealed herself by giving up her claim rather than have any harm come to the child. Mothers in Sparta and Italy were cited as examples of women who strictly disciplined their children but also demonstrated eternal love and total devotion.
- 2 It was proclaimed by Yi Sosa and Kim Sosa on September 1, 1898. The title, *sosa*, is a general title for women.
- 3 *Kisaeng* refers to women entertainers. They were categorized according to their status and prestige. *Samp'ae* means the lowest group of *kisaeng* in the hierarchy that was largely engaged in prostitution.